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TAQIYYA: THE ETHICS OF DECPETION

JEREMIAH J. BOWDEN

PROFESSOR HAMID MAVANI

In Partial Completion of REL 410EC: Islamic Ethics

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"If anyone is compelled and professes unbelief with his tongue, while his heart contradicts him, in order to escape his enemies, no blame falls on him, because God takes his servants as their hearts believe." Al-Tabari

I begin the current essay with a personal anecdote that provides the reasoning behind why I, as a Christian, feel a responsibility to write on the topic of *taqiyya.* For those unfamiliar with the term, *taqiyya* is a religious practice founded in Shi'a Islam that allows adherents to obscure their true beliefs when they face persecution, coercion, or compulsion.[1] The history of this practice will be borne out below, but for the time being I would like to return to my intentions in writing the current piece.

It was roughly a year ago when I last walked through the doors of Beaches Church* in the sunny SoCal city of Riverside. In the months prior, my family and I had begun to make Beaches our home. While there were times when the pastor's theology did not align perfectly with my own, his self-deprecating humor, the lively service and the friendliness of other attendees seemed to allay these concerns. My wife was so impressed with the church that she applied to work as one of their youth pastors. During one of her interviews she had the opportunity to meet with the lead pastor, Brian,* to discuss her background and goals for the future. One of the topics that happened to come up in their conversation was my interest in inter-religious dialogue. This seemed to be a topic that Matt was genuinely interested in, so he suggested that we meet the following Sunday.[2]

After meeting with Brian, it was apparent that our views concerning the ends of dialogue were quite divergent from one another. The statements of one his missionary associates epitomized this difference. He was telling the story of a recent mission trip to Turkey and the trouble he faced converting Muslims to Christianity there. He believed the main reason for his

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lack of success was the Muslim proclivity toward deception. How could he be successful when even those who vociferously claimed to become Christian, were probably deceiving him anyway? To say I found his broad generalizations morally repugnant would be an understatement.

As attracted as I was to the church, this would be the last conversation I would have with any member from Beaches. While it is impossible for me to be positive, and I doubt the young man would refer to the practice by name, I believe the young missionary was referring to the doctrine of *taqiyya.* As I will illustrate below, the doctrine of *taqiyya* originated amongst the Shi'is while they were facing persecution at the hands of the Sunnis and is not a danger to those living in the West today. However, some authors have contorted this doctrine to such a degree that one would believe that this is certainly the case.

For instance, in his article "How Taqiyya Alters Islam's Rules of War," Raymond Ibrahim contests, "Islam's dual notions of truth and falsehood further reveal its paradoxical nature: While the Qur'an is against believers deceiving other believers – for 'surely God guides not him who is prodigal and a liar' – deception directed at non-Muslims, generally know in Arabic as *taqiyya,* also has Qur'anic support and falls within the legal category of things that are permissible for Muslims."[3]

Nevertheless, the paradoxical nature of truth and falsity does not seem to be Ibrahim's main contention with Islam, he argues that the real issue is the depiction of deception as superior to other military virtues such as courage, fortitude, and self-sacrifice. Further, he believes that the doctrine of *taqiyya* is at the heart of several contemporary problems including the development of nuclear missiles by Iran, the shootings at Fort Hood, and the supposed terrorist sleeper cells scattered across the U.S.[4]

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I intend to counter Ibrahim's arguments in a number of ways. In the first section of the essay that follows, I will outline the historical development of the doctrine of *taqiyya.* In it, I will clarify the difference between permissible and obligatory actions and comment on two common approaches to adversarial engagement, martyrdom and quietism. This distinction will demonstrate that it is the virtue of protecting of human life, and not the act of deception itself, that Islam holds as being superior to other militaristic virtues.

The second section studies actual occurrences of the practice of *taqiyya* by looking at the exploits of medieval Assassins, as well as contemporary Shi'is in Azerbaijan and Afghanistan. In the final section, I argue that humankind should not fear the consequences of the Muslim practice of *taqiyya* any more than they ought to to fear other legitimatizations for deception. To show this I will be referencing situations that might be more readily accessible to the western mind. Essential to this comparison will be excerpts from Jewish and Christian scripture along with writings of classical Christian theologians.

After all of this, I have yet to answer the question, "Why take on this particular project?" In a recent meeting of the American Academy of Religion, renowned Muslim scholar Ibrahim Moosa emphasized the need to combat Islamophobia by tackling controversial topics such as discussions surrounding *taqiyya.*

Although I had been considering writing on the topic for a while before his talk, I had not earnestly wrestled with the reasons for doing so. Despite the fact that several scholars underscored the responsibility of the academy to speak out on instances of gross derogation, discrimination and denigration; their arguments paled in comparison to those put forward by Jewish theologian Marc Ellis and his exhortation to embrace the Jewish prophetic tradition to

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which all Abrahamic faiths lay claim. In a recent article on the Occupy movement Ellis describes the defining features of the prophetic tradition and its implications for those involved,

> Bonding with others of diverse backgrounds for justice is a distinctive feature of the Jewish prophetic tradition. The Jewish prophetic tradition features voices raised and bodies present. The prophetic tradition is about a history that is on the line… Our fellow Occupy companions can help in this endeavor by listening to the wounded heartbeat of the prophetic. And by standing strong for justice with their Jewish companions as Jews stand with others in their communal struggles. After all, it isn't only Jews that have to battle establishments in order to narrate their own prophetic story.[5]

After reading and listening to what Professor Ellis has to say, I now have an answer to those who ask me why I, as a Christian-American-White-Male, am concerned with the plight of Muslims in America and abroad. I can tell them that I am doing the distinctly Jewish, the distinctly Muslim, the distinctly Christian thing to do; embracing the Abrahamic prophetic tradition. It is with this principle in mind that I turn to the historical development of the doctrine of *taqiyya* and attempt to be a prophetic voice standing with others in their communal struggle against bigotry.

The History of Taqiyya:

The rise of *taqiyya* is largely due to the sectarianism that resulted shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E. This resulted in the oldest and largest split in the history of Islam – between the Sunnis and the Shi'as. The great schism of the Muslim *umma* occurred due to differences over how the next leader of the Muslim community ought to be chosen. Most of Muhammad's followers believed that it would be best if his successor was chosen democratically, with the elite of the community determining who the new leader would be. A smaller group, known today as the Shi'is, thought it would be best if the family of the Prophet took up his mantle. Specifically, they looked to Muhammad's son-in-law Ali to take control of the community.

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The majority group prevailed and elected Abu Bakr, a close companion of the Prophet, as the head of the Muslim community – its first Caliph. When Ali would not agree to pledge his allegiance to Abu Bakr, the division between the two groups began to grow. However, after a few months Ali capitulated in order to preserve the unity of the nascent Islamic State.[6]

Ali and his followers would have to wait not only until the death of the first Caliph Abu Bakr, but also for the deaths of the second, Umar ibn al-Khattab, and third, Uthman ibn 'Affan, before having a chance to lead the Muslim community. Yet, even at this stage, Ali was met with hostility.

'Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, opposed Ali's rule because she believed he was negligent in pursuing the murderers of the third Caliph, Uthman. Aisha chose to challenge Ali on the battlefield and in 656 C.E. she was defeated at the Battle of the Camel in Basra.[7] While Aisha eventually apologized for her actions, it was already too late, as the gap separating Shi'a and Sunni was quickly becoming an impassable chasm.

Ali's handling of Uthman's murder would continue to haunt him until his death a few short years later. Mu'awiya, one of Uthman's relatives, challenged Ali for the caliphate because Ali did not bring Uthman's killers to justice. The armies of Ali and Mu'awiya met at the Battle of Siffin in 657 C.E. This battle has become famous for Mu'awiya's soldiers placing verses from the Qur'an at the end of their spears. The battle ultimately proved to be indecisive due to the moral reservations of Ali and his supporters. Consequently, Ali and Mu'awiya chose to settle the matter through external mediation. On the surface, this may seem like an amicable solution; however, this agreement would lead to Ali's untimely demise.

A group of Ali's followers disagreed with Ali's choice of arbitration and decided to split from Shi'ism to begin their own sect, the Kharijites. In 661 C.E., as part of their pursuit of the

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caliphate, the Kharijites murdered Ali while he prayed in a mosque in Kufa. The Kharijites were defeated in a number of battles the following year, almost to the point of non-existence.[8]

After Ali's murder, Mu'awiya assumed the caliphate and established the Umayyad dynasty, which ruled from 670 C.E. to 750 C.E. Mu'awiya shaped the caliphate to resemble a monarchy, upon his death leadership passed down to his son Yazid. During Yazid's reign, the people of Kufa invited Ali's youngest son, Hussein, to be their ruler. Hussein agreed to make the voyage from his home in Medina to Kufa with his family and followers. In the year 680 C.E., during their journey to Kufa, Yazid's forces intercepted Hussein's party while they stopped in Karbala.

Although he was hopelessly outnumbered, Hussein refused to submit to Yazid. The Caliph's army massacred Hussein, his family, and the rest of his party. They decapitated Hussein and brought his head back to the Damascus as a trophy for the Caliph. They left Hussein's body on the battlefield where it was later buried.[9] Hussein's martyrdom continues to be commemorated as a day of mourning known as Ashura, which is celebrated on the tenth day of the month of Muharram.

Having traced out some of the historical circumstances that led to the rising animosity between Sunnis and Shi'ies, it is pertinent to pause here and consider Raymond Ibrahim's claim that "In fact, deceit, which is doctrinally grounded in Islam, is often depicted as being equal—sometimes superior—to other universal military virtues, such as courage, fortitude, or self-sacrifice."[10]

Personally, I think one would be hard-pressed to find a more vibrant example of these

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virtues (and I would not be surprised if Ibrahim criticizes the martyrdom motif of Hussein's

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death elsewhere.) Nevertheless, let us look at the differences between militancy and quietism as they manifested in Shi'ism.

Maria Dakake, an expert in the field of Shi'ite studies, posits "There were few official 'rituals' that distinguished Shi'ites from Sunnis in its early history; it was rather their religio-political views, and the belief that their Imam was the locus of legitimate religious and political authority over the Muslim community and the sole source of Prophetic knowledge and charisma."[11]

The difference, then, between militarism and quietism, depends upon the political maneuvers of Shi'ites in relation to the Sunnis. The death of Hussein illustrates a strong tendency toward militarism.[12] The high praise bestowed upon the anti-Umayyad rebels Hujr bin 'Adi, 'Amr bin Hamiq al-Khuza'i, Mitham bin Yahya al-Tammar and others for their willingness to die as martyrs in the battle against evil are other outstanding examples of this tendency.[13]

However, after the slaughter of Hussein's party there was a shift in Shi'a mentality. As the persecution of Shi'ites intensified under the rule of the Umayyads, the Shi'ite leader went underground. It is during this period that the practice of *taqiyya* became prevalent in order to protect adherents and the Imams from the larger Islamic public. According to Shi'ites, the Imams are the living embodiment of Prophetic charisma and thus, are the only true and infallible spiritual guides within the Islamic community, this stands in direct opposition to the claims of the Sunnis and their view of the caliphate.[14]

As Dakake makes explicit, the Imams' "very presence was said, in some traditions, to be a support for the world without which, it would cease to exist… claims that all authority over the

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Islamic community outside themselves was intrinsically illegitimate were not tolerated by the

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caliphs and authorities; hence both the identity of the Shi'ite Imam, and the nature of his authority had to be treated with sensitivity."[15]

Further, the belief in the Imam's absolute and infallible authority meant that those who claimed leadership, as well as those who supported them, were guilty of acting against God's will. This has tremendous implications for the caliphate and those who support it. This leads Dakake to conclude, "Thus Shi'ite views regarding the Imams' authority were both politically dangerous to the ruling class and religiously offensive to many Muslims."[16]

Having touched on the lives of the first and third Imams, Ali and Hussein, and how they handled confrontations with their Sunni counterparts, I would like to turn to the writings of the fifth and sixth Imams as they are the two most public figures amongst Imams who followed Hussein. Beyond this, they provide excellent examples of the quietist tendencies of Shi'ite Islam.[17]

Etan Kohlberg, one of the foremost scholars of Shi'ism in the world, attests "The first clear pronouncements on *taqiyya* in Imami literature may be traced back to the generation of Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 114/732 or 117/735) and his son Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765), the fifth and sixth Imams respectively."[18] During their lives, both al-Baqir and al-Sadiq tried to remain outside the tumultuous political activity of their time. Although Shi'is were mercilessly persecuted by both the Umayyads and the Abbasids who followed, al-Baqir and al-Sadiq believed that the Shi'is best opportunity for survival was not taking up arms against the enemy but rather by preserving and proliferating Shi'ism through the practice of precautionary dissimulation (*taqiyya*).[19]

Both of the Imams seem aware of the disconnect between their views on survival and the cherished examples of martyrdom from Shi'ite history. Al-Baqir tended to view both martyrdom

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and *taqiyya* as equally viable options. In one of the stories passed down through the ages, al-Baqir hears of two Shi'ite men who have been captured and compelled to renounce their loyalty to Ali. One of the men chose to relent to the demands of the captors and was set free, while the other refused to do so and was put to death. Upon hearing the fates of these two men, the Imam, showing no preference between the two acts, remarked "that the first man was well-versed in his religion (knowing the wisdom of *taqiyyah*), while the second was 'eager for paradise.'"[20]

Showing a progression away from violent conflict, Al-Sadiq is much more hesitant to embrace martyrdom as a preferable, or equitable, option to *taqiyya.* Imam al-Sadiq recounts how a disciple once inquired about the permissibility of disavowing Ali, citing a well-known statement of Ali in which he allowed followers to curse him when they faced persecution, but never to religiously dissociate from him.[21] Al-Sadiq responds by averring that one does not need to choose death over dissociation from Ali. For evidence of this, he refers to the actions of 'Ammar bin Yasir, who in the formative years of Islam reverted to outward pagan practice to evade persecutors.[22] The verse "Anyone who, after accepting faith in Allah, utters unbelief, except under compulsion […] on them is Wrath from Allah, and theirs will be a dreadful penalty" (Qur'an 16:106) directly relates to Yasir's situation.[23]

Interestingly, al-Sadiq goes beyond merely arguing for the permissibility of *taqiyya,* by establishing its preeminence over martyrdom. Imam Sadiq calls the actions of celebrated Shi'ite martyr Maytham al-Tamar into question by wondering aloud why al-Tamar did not choose the path of *taqiyya.*[24] A follower once asked al-Sadiq whether he supported militant *jihad* he responded by saying, "I do not approve of it, no, by God, I do not approve of it."[25] Later Imams would inherit Imam Sadiq's distaste for open conflict. The ninth Imam, Muhammad al-Jawad, states, "I do not recognize in this age any jihad except for the hajj and the umra."[26]

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Nevertheless, although the doctrine of *taqiyya* was not clarified until the time of the fifth and sixth Imams, this does not mean that it was not practiced beforehand. The actions of Salman al-Farisi, one of the companions of the Prophet, render this fact obvious. A report about Salman alleges that Jews flogged him over a hundred times in an attempt to compel him to renounce the prophethood of Muhammad. When he would not cave to their demands, the Jews reminded him of the permissibility of *taqiyya.* Al-Farisi retorted, "God has given me dispensation to do so [to practice *taqiyya*] but has not imposed it on me as a duty; he has rather permitted me to refuse you what you want and to endure your loathsome actions; [indeed], he has made this the more noble of the two courses of action."[27] While the example of Farisi is helpful in illustrating the prior existence of the practice of *taqiyya,* it also does the much more important job of highlighting the role of personal choice in resolving to do the act or not.

Even though Salman claims that the choice is ultimately his, some scholars would disagree. One of the earliest to do so is Imami scholar Muahmmad bin 'Ali ibn Babawayhi (d. 381/991). Babawayhi maintains that one is obliged to practice *taqiyya* while residing in lands ruled by oppressors, unless the practice would result in danger to human life, at which point it ought to be abandoned.[28]

It seems possible that Babawayhi was drawing from a similar tradition preserved in Imam Rida's (the eighth Imam, d. 203/817) discussion of martyrdom and *taqiyya,*

> Jihad is obligatory (wajib) with a just Imam, and whosoever fights and is killed, leaving aside his property and baggage and person, is a martyr. But it is not permitted to slay even one of the unbelievers within the realm of *taqiyya* (*dar al-taqiyya*), with the exception of a murderer or a dissenter (*baghin*), nor to consume the property of the people of opposition or others. *Taqiyya* is obligatory in the realm of *taqiyya,* and there is no sin for a man who embraces it in order to ward off injustice from himself.[29]

It is worth underscoring the importance Imam Rida places on the intentionality of the practice of *taqiyya,* namely, that the practice is without sin only when done to ward off injustice.

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Al-Shayk al-Mufid (d. 413/1022), the most authoritative Imami scholar of the Buwayhid period, elaborates on the ethical underpinnings and guidelines of *taqiyya* when he writes, "*taqqiyya* should be practiced only if it is known by a necessary knowledge (*bi'i-darura*) or of it is probable (*qawiya fi 'l-zann*) that its abandonment would cause harm to the true religion or to the believers in this world."[30]

In his *Awa'il al-maqalat,* al-Mufid describes the role of the agent in determining the permissibility of *taqiyya,*

> I say that *taqiyya* is permissible in religion when there is fear for one's life. It may also sometimes be permitted when there is danger to one's property or when the well-being of the community may be promoted. I say that sometimes it is obligatory and its observance becomes a religious duty, and sometimes it is permissible but not obligatory; at times it is best to practice it and at other times it is better to abandon it; though even when it is best abandoned, he who practices it is excused and pardoned.[31]

Therefore, the ultimate arbiter in deciding the permissibility/acceptability of the practice of *taqiyya* is the believer himself. The great Imami scholar Abu Ja'far al-Tusi (d. 460/1067) nuances the position of al-Mufid by clarifying the superiority of telling the truth in relation to practicing *taqiyya.* He does so by reminding believers that pronouncing the truth is a virtue, whereas the practice of *taqiyya* is merely a dispensation.[32]

The twentieth century scholar Muhammad Husayn Al Kashif al-Ghita (1877-1954) argues against Sunni polemicists by citing the rules to performing *taqiyya:* 1.) It is obligatory if its abandonment would cause useless death; 2.) When a person might derive an inner strength from publically professing his true beliefs, he is at liberty to follow his impulse and abandon *taqiyya,* though he may still practice it; 3.) *Taqiyya* is forbidden if its practice would lead to the spreading of falsehood and injustice.[33] For al-Ghita the practice of *taqiyya* is not something exclusive to Shi'ism but rather he sees it as a choice which is dictated by reason. Accordingly, a person may choose to die for his convictions but "jeopardizing one's life for any other reason is sheer stupidity and foolhardiness, sanctioned neither by religion nor by law."[34]

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The previous section provides the historical context for the practice of *taqiyya.* Germane to this discussion is the sectarianism that arose after the death of the Prophet and the resultant persecution of Shi'is. The section also outlines the integral role of the moral agent in determining the permissibility of *taqiyya.* Reference to the writings of Imams and classical Imami scholars have made the true nature of the practice clearer, as their work presents *taqiyya* as not the championing of deceit as such, but rather as a means of protecting human life at any cost. The section that follows investigates whether the actual practice of *taqiyya* has lived up to its intended aims through explorations of its implementation in various periods and locations.

Case Studies: Interpretations of Taqiyya

The following pages examine cases of *taqiyya* commonly referenced in contemporary conversations. The section begins with a look at the controversial Assassin order of the Ismailis-Nizaris, before moving onto models of *taqiyya* taken from the histories of Azerbaijan and Afghanistan. I intend to show that the actual practice of *taqiyya* is seldom, if ever, as devious as typically characterized. The Assassins pose the biggest challenge in this regard, hence the reason I begin with them.

The Ismailis-Nizari are the second largest group of Shi'a Muslims in the world. They number around 15 million people. One of their more famous orders, commonly known as the Assassins, existed from the late eleventh to the late thirteenth centuries C.E. (1090-1275). While they only existed for a short amount of time, the Assassins continue to fascinate minds all over the world. They recently reentered the collective consciousness of the West through the surfeit of discussions pertaining to the role of religion in acts of extreme violence. Interestingly, they are also finding a new audience through the sale of millions of video games and graphic novels

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associated with the Assassin's Creed franchise. However, for the purposes of the current work we will be concentrating on how Assassins utilized both the concept of martyrdom and the doctrine of *taqiyya* to accomplish their political ambitions.

While some authors, such as Andrew Campbell, like to argue that Assassins are the progenitors to modern day extremists; this is clearly not the case.[35] The targets chosen by Assassins were often prominent individuals among the ruling elite, whereas today's radicals often target ordinary citizens. While both groups may have wanted to create as much publicity as possible through their actions, the Assassins did so by murdering their victims in venerated sites and royal courts where modern day extremists resort to wanton violence in highly populated areas.

Another important distinction that one ought to make is their differing views on martyrdom. Contemporary suicide bombers choose self-martyrdom by blowing themselves up – their deaths are necessary to bring about the desired effects. Assassins also chose self-martyrdom; however, theirs was much different. The death of the Assassin, while just as probable as that of the suicide bomber, is different insofar as it is the unintended result of his actions – he stabs a prominent figure in public and is subsequently murdered by the royal guard. His death is attributable to the actions of others. The suicide bomber, on the other hand, has only himself to blame.

All the same, beyond the current debates focusing on the heritage of religious extremism, understanding the Assassins' view of martyrdom and eschatology is vital to understanding their use of *taqiyya.* The role of eschatology is especially important, as terrorism expert David Rapoport makes clear, "Islamic millenarian movements are largely associated with the Shia (the minority) who believe that eventually a *Mahdi* (Messiah or Rightly Guided One) would emerge

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to lead a holy war (*jihad*) against the orthodox establishment to cleanse Islam… an essential part of the Mahdist theory regards the *jihad* in the sense of an armed revolutionary struggle, as a method whereby a perfected social order must be brought into being."[36]

Contradistinctively, the believer is also told to be quietist in their approach, their only duty being to hold their faith intact until the Mahdi arrives, Rapoport continues, "To protect a believer among hostile Muslims until the moment arrives, the Shia permit pious dissimulation, *taqiyya.* The pure are allowed to conceal their beliefs for much the same reason that we condone deception during war. Should an opportunity materialize, the Shia must 'use their tongues,' or preach their faith openly; but not until the Mahdi arrives are they allowed to 'draw the sword.'"[37]

The Assassins bridge these seemingly paradoxical stances by accomplishing the former by using a tricky interpretation of the latter, let me explain. The Assassins took the prohibition to not draw their swords literally and instead used daggers to kill their victims, as they believed ridding the world of evil tyrants this would help facilitate the arrival of the Mahdi.[38] As Rapoport highlights, "Victims were orthodox religious or political leaders who refused to heed warning, and therefore provoked an attack by being scornful of the New Preaching, by attempting to prevent it from being heard, and by acting in ways that demonstrated complicity in Islam's corruption."[39]

The most troubling aspect of the Assassins' plots was the methods the perpetrators used to gain access to their victims. The Assassin perpetrators were often referred to as the *fidayeen* (the redeemers, those who sacrifice), and the relationship they share with their victims was quite unique. At a young age, the *fidayeen* would enter the service of a high official gaining his trust through acts of devotion, and then, "at the appropriate time, the faithful servant would plunge a dagger into his master's back. So preternatural did this immunity from personal or ordinary

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feelings seem to orthodox Muslims that they described the group as 'hashish eaters' (*hashashin*), the source of our term assassin."[40]

As immoral and inhuman as these actions seem, they are rather moral alternatives to traditional warfare. The strike of the Assassin's dagger was calculated and precise, like a surgeon using a scalpel to remove a parasitic mass from the body it inflects; where traditional warfare is more like a grenade – indiscriminate, obliterating anything it comes into contact with. What is troubling is the fact that the *fidayeen* would assume the role of allies for such long periods before making their true intentions known. When one practices *taqiyya* in this manner, the relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxy becomes almost unrecognizable.

Because there is such a gap between how the Imams explained *taqiyya* and how the *fidayeen* practiced it, one is able to see them as an aberration, and not truly representative of the normative practice. It also demonstrates the ease in which a religious doctrine can be distorted to fit one's needs. Surely, the Assassins viewed their objectives and means as moral, but it seems as though they rely heavily on questionable interpretations of the Imam's demands and unverifiable claims of moral superiority. I would like to turn to a more recent example that seems to bridge the gap between orthopraxy and orthodoxy concerning the practice of *taqiyya,* the struggle of Muslims under Soviet rule in Azerbaijan during the early twentieth century C.E.

The Sunni-Shia split was a major concern to the modernizing efforts taking place in Azerbaijan during the mid-nineteenth century C.E. The modern-minded intelligentsia believed an embrace of secularism would provide the means to move past this centuries old conflict.[41] As a result the first iteration of an Azerbaijani republic was a secular nation-state, however it only existed a couple of years before Soviet forces overtook the region.

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Historian Tadeusz Swietochowski writes on the impact of Soviet rule on Islamic practice in Azerbaijan, "By every measure, Soviet rule proved the crucial test for Islam in Azerbaijan. Initially, the Bolshevik regime tended to moderation, reflecting the belief that Muslims should reach socialism through their own path since Islamic notions of politics and society did not contradict Marxism. As oppressed victims of European imperialism, Islam also accorded with the Communist vision of the East as the prime mover of world-revolution."[42]

The initial Soviet reforms were minor and were accomplished under the aegis of the modernization movement. The expropriation of the charitable foundations, the closure of Islamic civil courts, and the banning of Ashura rituals of self-flagellation are examples of these reforms.[43] However, what began as a modernization effort quickly became a means of repression under Stalin. Utilizing the rhetoric of the modernizing movement, Stalin began his campaign to emancipate Muslim women. As Swietochowski explains, "Reinforcing the symbolic act of discarding the veil, Soviet legislation inflicted severe punishment for practices, rooted in the native traditions, as polygamy, marrying underage women, bridal payment (*kalym*), and abduction, as well as blood vengeance."[44]

Certainly, reforms protecting the dignity of women are steps in the right direction. However, the transfer of power from the religious elite to the secular meant major reforms were on the horizon. Claiming there was a declining interest in the practice of Islam, the government began closing down mosques at an alarming rate. An estimated 1,700 mosques in 1928 dwindled down to a paltry 17 just five short years later.[45] Those who sided with the religiously minded were accused of being Pan-Islamists and were subsequently terrorized by the state. Needless to say this kept many faithful citizens from attending Friday prayers.[46]

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This leads Swietchowski to inquire, "What were the long-range effects of this brutal, persistent, and all pervading campaign against Islam?"[47] The answer – a privatization of religion. The outward displays of Islamic identity – the public profession of faith, the pilgrimage to Mecca, fasting in the month of Ramadan, almsgiving, and the five daily prayers – all fell into disuse. Swietochowski avers, "At the same time, it was often deemed too risky to pass along the tenets of Islam to the young, who grew up unable to say if their ancestry was Shia or Sunni. The prevailing adage became 'keep religion in your heart,' which was supplemented by another maxim, 'say what is required from you and save your freedom of mind.'"[48]

The actions of the Azeris seem to adhere to the exhortations of the Imams and the jurists in a way that the actions of the Assassins did not. The actions of the Azeris effectively close the chasm between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. What other manifestations of *taqiyya* are found in the actions of the Azeris? Swietochowski cites a dramatic rise in membership to the Godless Society, from a meager 3,000 members in 1930 to over 60,000 members the following year, as a prime example of the Azeri predisposition toward dissimulation.[49] Further proof is found in the timing of the Islamic revival of the late twentieth century C.E. "Gradually, during the Soviet imperial twilight, signs of religious reawakening not only multiplied but surfaced into the open. According to Soviet sources, during the late 1970s around 1,000 clandestine houses of prayer were in use, and some 300 places of pilgrimage were identifiable. This growth proved the prelude to the public openings of hundreds of mosques in the following decade."[50]

In Azerbaijan we see both Sunnis and Shi'ites practicing *taqiyya* to protect themselves from the discriminatory policies of the Communist state. In Afghanistan the situation is analogous but the lines between friend and foe are drawn differently. Here Sunni Muslims persecute Shi'ites, which leads some Shi'ites to dissimulate amongst the Sunnis while others

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seek to blend in with the Soviets. In the paragraphs that follow, I will reveal how the sectarian conflicts that originally provoked the Shi'ite practice of *taqiyya* are still prevalent today.

In his article on the role of *taqiyya* in Afghanistan, Hafizullah Emadi narrates the history of discrimination against the Ismaili sect of Shi'ism beginning with the massacre of Ismailis during the reign of King Mahmood of Ghanavid (997-1030 C.E.) and ending with their somewhat recent struggles to escape the regressive Islamization policies of the Taliban.[51] I would like to focus on two contemporary instances of inequity in particular and Ismaili responses to this adversity. The first issue studied is the reduced role of Ismaili religious leaders, and the second being the lack of educational and employment opportunities for the Ismaili populace.

Unfortunately, I will not be able to address the general atmosphere of animosity between Afghan Sunnis and Ismailis. However, it is worthwhile to mention at least one example of this situation before moving one. One of the justifications given for the pejorative view of Ismailis amongst Afghani Sunnis is the belief that, "No Isma'iliya knows who his father is… because after the lamps are put out in the huts at night, sexual license prevails. No one knows who is sleeping with whom. Maybe a sister. Maybe even a mother."[52] The Sunnis are essentially calling the mothers of all Ismailis' whores.

As disconcerting as these social conditions are, to truly understand the predicament of Ismailis living in Afghanistan one ought to consider the degradation of the their elite religious class the *Pir.* Before continuing, it is prudent to remark on the main difference between Ismaili Shi'ism and Imami Shi'ism as it helps clarify the role of the *pirs*.

Ismailis believe in a different succession of the Imamate beginning with the seventh Imam. They followed Imam Sadiq's eldest son Ismail ibn Jafar, whereas Imamis chose to follow Ismail's younger brother Musa al-Kazim. Two different lineages of the Imamate resulted. The

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Imami lineage ends with the twelfth Imam, Abu al-Qasim (868 –), whom Imamis believe to be a messianic figure who remains in occultation until the end times. Ismailis, on the other hand, believe that the Imamate continued to be passed down through the descendents of Ismail ibn Jafar. The current Ismaili Imam being Shah Karimy-l-Hussayni Aga Khan IV (born in 1936, reigning since 1957.) The *Pir,* then, are the appointed representatives of the Ismaili Imam.

The Ismaili Imam, whose headquarters were in Iran at the time, first appointed *pirs* in the early fifteenth century C.E. because he lacked the ability to contact his followers in central Asia.[53] The power and wealth of the pirs continued to grow until the end of the nineteenth century C.E. creating small dynasties in the areas where they were originally given authority. The pirs were so influential that John Didulph, a Bristish colonel who was visiting the area in 1874, wrote:

> The respect paid to the pirs by their disciples is unbound, nothing is refused them… One of them once said… 'if I ordered a father to kill his own son, he dare not refuse'. Whenever they move about, they are attended by a large number of followers, who are fed and maintained out of their superfluities, and they live entirely on the offering of their disciples. Presents of horses, cattle and the best of everything is given to the *pir*[54].

Even so, by 1929 the powerful *pirs* had lost all political significance as Emadi relates, "Although, the state did not suppress the Ismailis, the Sunni majority continued to discriminate against them. Ismaili *pirs* did not have any role in the political decision-making process within the state bureaucracy. Their role was restricted to local politics, in which they commonly acted as intermediaries between the community and government officials."[55] When your elite ruling class has become the lapdogs of government officials, there is no denying that there has been a radical change in your place in the world.

The decrease in stature was not reserved for the *pirs* alone. The 1960s and 1970s were decades of vast capitalistic expansion and modernization in Afghanistan. Yet, in his description of the poor living conditions faced by Ismailis Emadi writes, "the Ismaili-settled regions in

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Badakhshan received barely adequate financial support from the central government. Although a small segment of Badakshanis were able to build lives of sybaritic comfort for themselves, the overwhelming majority remained poor. Poverty, underdevelopment and lack of employment opportunities and investment by the state dismayed the elites in the Shughan district."[56]

The Afghani Ismailis responded to these injustices in a number of ways. The majority of Ismaili elites believed that they only remedy to their social and economic owes was joining forces with the Soviets.[57] They had seen the positive effect socialist policies had on the Ismailis living in Gorno-Badaknshan and China, so they decided to join the pro-Soviet Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan. The Ismailis gradually became more vocally critical of the ruling regime and ended up supporting the Soviet occupation of the country from December 1979 – February 1989. Ismailis refused to participate in the Mujahidin's call for holy war against the Kabul regime and as Emadi mentions, "During the Soviet occupation period it is estimated that as many as three percent of Ismailis lost their lives in the struggle to defend the regime against the Islamists battling for the establishment of an Islamic state."[58]

Outward aggression against Sunnis may have been a viable option during the Soviet occupation, but a different strategy was required after Soviet withdrawal. One option was emulating the Prophet's *hijra* (emigration from Mecca to Medina) when he was being persecuted. After the Taliban seized power in September 1996, many Ismailis fled the civil strife and ethnic cleansing that resulted by taking up residence in Pakistani refugee camps.[59]

The final option we will be exploring is the Afghani Ismaili practice of *taqiyya.* The late scholar of Afghan culture and history Louis Dupree claims, "Many holding high positions publically proclaim themselves to be Sunni, but will privately admit to being Shi'i."[60] Dupree acknowledges the abhorrent condition of Shi'is living in Afghanistan when he writes, "A

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definition of *taqiyya,* as it applies to Afghanistan, might be 'protective dissimulation,' rather than the 'precautionary dissimulation' of Kohlberg."[61]

For Dupree, who was writing well before Taliban rule, the living situation of Ismailis residing in Afghanistan had become so corrupt that the practice of dissimulation could no longer be considered a precautionary action – a hedging of one bets, so to speak, over a possible negative outcome – but rather as a protective action – an act, which if left unperformed, would necessarily lead to mortal peril.

Of the possible reactions to blatant injustice covered above, it seems as though the last is the one that appears the most reasonable and ethically sound. While space does not allow for a complete treatise on the morality of war and killing, the writings of the Imams demonstrated the high value placed on human life within the Islamic tradition. Due to the extreme cost of human lives and the vast disparity of military power, I think we can safely eliminate revolutionary militancy as a justified response in this situation.

Criticizing the emigration of Ismailis to Pakistan is a bit trickier, although I think the argument could be made that social change is more readily brought about by working from within a system. If this turned out to be the case, those who remained in Afghanistan could be said to have made the better choice. Further, if one is able to practice *taqiyya* and remain unnoticed, it seems much more reasonable to remain in one's house rather than seeking refuge in a camp in Pakistan. Regardless, the past several pages have laid bare the ethical foundations of the Islamic practice of *taqiyya,* as well as exhibited how this practice is undertaken to assure survival and equality. The final section that follows is a comparative analysis that contrasts the practice of *taqiyya* to Western analogs taken from Christian scripture and theology.

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Taqiyya in the West

This final section is the one in which my Christian background has the most promise to add something distinctive to the discussion at hand. The paragraphs below are expository in nature, as the narratives they refer to need little, if any, explanation. I begin by tracing the practice of dissimulation back to the father of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths, Abraham.

According to the Hebrew Bible, Abraham practices dissimulation on at least two separate occasions, the first was during his travels in Egypt where he pretends to be his wife's brother so the Pharaoh will spare his life. The following account relates the aftermath:

> But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had. (Gen 12:17-20)[62]

The Bible tells a similar story of Abraham's encounter with Abimelech:

> Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her. But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman."
> (Gen 20:1-3)

When Abimelech questions Abraham's reasons for lying to him, Abraham answers,

> "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."'" (Gen 20:11-13)

The dissimulation of Abraham is not an isolated incident in the Hebrew Bible, his son Isaac made the exact same claim referring to his wife Rebekah while they were traveling in Gerar for the exact same reasons as his father Abraham (Gen 26:7). Abraham's grandson Jacob practices dissimulation while seeking the blessing of his father Isaac (Gen 27:24). But the most famous example of dissimulation in the Hebrew Bible is found within the pages of the Book of Esther. Esther is an orphan who eventually marries the Persian king Ahasuerus (commonly

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believed to be Xerxes I). She conceals her Jewish identity from her husband until a plot to exterminate her people comes to light. At which point she reveals her Jewish heritage and seeks revenge against those who were planning to attack the Jews.

One should also mention that examples of dissimulation are not found exclusively in the Old Testament. Peter's denial of Jesus, an event that each of the synoptic Gospels records, provides Christian readers with an ample amount of material to consider when thinking about the permissibility of dissimulation.

After the Lord's Supper, Jesus predicts that his followers will all fall away after he is taken and he tells Peter in particular that he will deny being associated with him:

> "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: "'I will strike the shepherd,and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same. (Mark 14: 27-31)

It is worth pointing out that Jesus does not reprimand the disciples for the actions they are about to commit, but rather accepts it as an inevitability after which they will be reunited in Galilee. Peter's first denial comes in a conversation with a young woman:

> Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in."You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself. (John 18:15-18)

After reading the text, it does not appear that Peter has done anything that would render him an object of scorn and opprobrium. Peter's second denial occurs shortly after the first, as he is walking out of the courtyard:

> Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth."He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" (Matthew 26:71-2)

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Peter's final denial of Jesus is the most telling of the three:

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> About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean." Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:59-62)

After Peter denies Jesus, Jesus looks at Peter but does not reprove him. Peter then walks away feeling dejected; this reaction is quite provocative. How does Peter's disconsolate attitude relate to the inner-disposition of Muslims practicing *taqiyaa?* Is this a point of convergence or an opportunity for further debate? If a religious exemplar commits an act, does this make the act justified? For some insight into this question, I turn to the preeminent Christian theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas scholar Lawrence Dewan begins his article on Aquinas and the permissibility of lying by demarcating the differences between mortal and venial sin, "The distinction between venial sin and mortal sin is not directly about species of sin. What is in kind a venial sin can be done in such a way as to make it mortal, and what is in kind a mortal sin can be done in such as to make it venial."[63] The importance of this distinction cannot be overemphasized, as mortal sin distances the believer from God and removes His favor – effectively extinguishing his chances of getting into heaven, whereas venial sin does not have this detrimental effect. What, then, determines whether a sin is venial or mortal if it is not necessarily a distinction intrinsic to the act?

For Aquinas the intention of the agent is of the upmost importance. Aquinas concludes "And so it is not permissible to tell a lie in order that one free another from any peril whatsoever. Nevertheless it is permissible to hide the truth prudently under some dissimulation, as Augustine says in the book *Against the Lie."*[64] Accordingly, Aquinas constructs a hierarchy of lies, to determine which lies are the most threatening to the soul. Dewan explains,

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> It is here that we have the famous triad of lies: malicious, jocose, and officious (or out of kindness). Obviously, lies that aim to injure are mortal sins, but lies that are in themselves venial, and are performed to amuse, are venial. And *even less grave* than the comic lie is the kind lie, where one's motive is actually to help someone. This should be underlined. The so-called officious lie – the lie out of kindness, the lie to save lives – is of even less moral importance than the comic lie which, by the way it is told, is meant to deceive no one.[65]

The way Aquinas argues his point parallels Aristotle, who only calls "bad" that which is harmful to other people, however, Aquinas nuances this view by calling "bad" that which is repugnant to right reason.[66] While some important differences continue to exist between the methods of Christians and Muslims in determining the permissibility of dissimulation, for instance if it is only permissible to lie in order to save others or if one ought to be able to save oneself. However, as the previous pages have shown, these methods are by no means so alien from one another as to leave no common ground from which a fruitful may spring.

Conclusion

It is rather disheartening to read the musings of so many authors who worry about the practice of *taqiyya* but simultaneously see no problem with the F.B.I. planting fake extremists in mosques around the U.S. to root out terrorist cells. Certainly, there is a need to reevaluate what it means to be morally consistent, as this does not mean consistently worrying about a minority group infiltrating your homeland.

At the beginning of this paper I set out to accomplish three goals. One, to demonstrate how the practice of *taqiyya* can be seen as a move away from the militaristic tendencies of a martyrdom culture. Secondly, I wanted to reveal the ethical considerations that moral agents ought to take into account when deciding to practice *taqiyya,* namely, what are the intentions behind the act. Are they practicing dissimulation simply to fool those around them or does the actor see the practice as necessary to protecting human life, property, progeny, freedom of

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thought or religion? Lastly, I wanted to give examples of dissimulation from the Christian tradition, as I believe finding common ground between these two faiths will help alleviate the fears of ordinary citizens. It is my hope that I have at least come close to achieving my intended goals; that I have at least added one prophetic voice to the conversation.

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* The names of the church and those affiliated with it have been changed to protect their privacy.
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